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## **The Hermann Michael Biggs Memorial Lecture** on **THE EUGENIC OUTLOOK IN PREVENTIVE MEDICINE\***

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I am greatly honored, Mr. President, by the invitation of the Committee on Public Health Relations of The New York Academy of Medicine, and conveyed so kindly through you, to deliver the Hermann Biggs Memorial Lecture. I hesitated in my acceptance, partly because I was doubtful if I could present you with any topic which might reasonably be called a phase of public health, and partly because I was uncertain if I could maintain the high level of those who have preceded me in this Lectureship, and so do justice to the memory of the distinguished man in whose honor we are met together.

Hermann Biggs' contributions to public health were, as most of you know, epoch-making in their importance. I may perhaps be forgiven if I repeat the short summary of his main achievements, as recorded by Dr. Parran in his lecture last year: "the introduction" (into this country) "of diphtheria antitoxin; the use of the laboratory as the spear-head of the public health movement; the first requirement that tuberculosis be reported and the administrative control of the disease; the campaign for public education concerning tuberculosis, later expanded to include all phases of public health; the pioneer efforts to reduce infant mortality; the first municipal effort to control venereal

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diseases"; and a comprehensive "New York health center program." Truly, a formidable list of contributions to human welfare made by one man. And when we add "the inspiration of his teaching and leadership," and the fact that he "combined the qualities of a great clinician" with these other gifts, Hermann Biggs is clearly an outstanding figure in the history of medicine and a name deserving of the greatest honor.

As has been the case with not a few leaders in sociological progress who have been possessed of dynamic personalities, Biggs was to some extent a disappointed man at the end, because his main project had not been brought to completion. But those who are able to take a dispassionate survey of the present state of the health services in New York City know how potent was the influence which Biggs exercised, and how sound was the foundation which he helped to lay. The complete solution of the problems which he set himself has not yet been found. But by a frank and intelligent co-operation between organized medicine and the public authorities the solution is only a matter of time. If I may borrow a simile from my own country, St. Paul's Cathedral is not even yet finished as it was originally designed by the master mind of Christopher Wren. But it is no less glorious a monument to his genius.

Various aspects of the Common Health have been presented to you by my distinguished predecessors in this office. During the decade since this Lectureship was founded men as well known as S. Lyle Cummins, Park, Krause, Bigelow, Stokes and Mosenthal have stood where I stand this evening, each presenting the aspect of preventive medicine to which he has given years of study and thought and to which he has made contributions of great value. Small wonder that I hesitated to accept the Academy's invitation, Sir, when faced with this roll of Hermann Biggs' lecturers until now. But, as I say, my hesitation was not lessened by the thought that the outlook upon preventive medicine which I felt constrained to offer you might not be regarded as a legitimate contribution to this important subject.

For I am making bold to present this evening an entirely different aspect of Public Health from any of those that have been given in previous lectures. By some, it may not even be regarded as an aspect of this matter at all; by others it may be considered an aspect which has little or no corresponding practical issues. And yet I, personally, am convinced of its importance, nay of its urgency. And I feel sure that I shall not be judged on either of these grounds without a patient hearing, and that is all that any one of us has a right to ask or to expect. I propose to present the eugenic outlook on the common health, and to beg that you will give it your thoughtful consideration.

I must in the first place define my terms.

The definition of Eugenics handed down to us by Francis Galton, who himself coined the word fifty years ago, is: "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally." Galton's aim was ambitious, so ambitious, indeed, that his outlook has been regarded by most people as that of a visionary. Change the race? (they say) Why, that is surely a fantastic idea, savoring of the Utopias of old. "It is too high, I cannot attain unto it." And quite apart from that sympathy which most of us have with the Irishman who asked "What has posterity done for me?" we are in the main confirmed opportunists. Surely our own mental and physical salvation is a sufficient objective (we plead), without considering future generations? To say nothing of the shocks and long pauses introduced into a single generation by wars and economic hold-ups, and the energy needed for their adjustment.

The fact that there exist societies and organizations galore whose activities are concerned with human betterment in our day bears witness to that urge that is inherent in many of us to do something to help our fellows. Whether, and to what degree, this altruism springs from biological incentives, and is really an expression of the ego in sublimated form, as the psychologists tell us, need not concern me in this connection. It is sufficient to note that there

is a large body of good intention, backed by tradition and culture, and supported by wealth, whether of the individual or of the state, available for social reforms. The question that does concern me at the moment is this—is all this expenditure of good endeavor and of money directed into the channels which are calculated to produce the most fundamental, and the most enduring, benefits? Long observation and reflection have convinced me that they are not. This does not mean that schemes for social reform are intrinsically unhelpful, still less does it mean that they should not be encouraged. All it means is that, in the view of the eugenicist—a view which I share with utter conviction—the economic advantages, using the term in its widest sense, lie with efforts made towards racial betterment rather than with social service in a particular generation.

Since the outlook between attempts at improving the environment of the people, and attempts at improving the stock, are entirely different, there can really be no conflict between social reform and eugenics. Our attitude towards those critics who suggest such a conflict is to say: "These things ye ought to do, but not to have left the others undone." The psychology of the position must be faced, and those of us who feel impelled thereto must contest it. What cramps our style again and again is the lure of immediate results. It is a weak strain in human nature. With the communist it takes the form of a lust for direct action, "and damn the consequences." With the politicians it is "nine-pence for sixpence—and I hope no one will notice the slight economic fallacy involved." With the sick man it is the bottle of medicine or an operation. But what, in the main, are all these things save expedients of the moment; temporary devices that can only secure transitory and impermanent results? Too often, alas! they are tricks of the charlatan, whose sole motive is to be the chief actor upon the stage; at their best they must be repeated again and again, and generation after generation, in order to keep the social fabric from falling. Though the eugenicist has no sort of quarrel with the principle underlying social and environmental reforms when these are wisely conceived and

efficiently carried out, he is bound to notice that a number of efforts in these directions seem to be of the nature of tinkering. And since all such efforts mean expenditure of energy and money, he naturally regards these as being largely wasted by comparison with the furthering of his own aims. He considers that it is more important to see to it that the material upon which he spends his altruism is the best material possible than to be merely lavish in his expenditure.

Time does not allow me the digression which would be entailed by pursuing this point of view. Suffice it to say that the eugenist is more humanist than humanitarian in his outlook and in his work. He does not believe that permanent results will accrue from pampering the individual or from trying to lead his life for him. He believes rather that it is a divine prerogative for every individual that he should live his own life, and that for others to abrogate this privilege is to do him a great disservice. On the other hand, he believes that to do his utmost to start every new life on as sound and sturdy a basis as possible is the greatest service that one human being can render to another. Such is the Eugenist's creed.

If I may for a moment deal with the national stocktaking of life today—I speak of conditions in Great Britain—I find these somewhat disturbing facts. For years every child has been educated, the clever, the strong, the blind, the dull, and the feeble-minded. For twenty years we have had National Health Insurance, and the number of Maternity and Child Welfare Centres has greatly increased. Much money has been spent on the needy, on housing and on a number of other things. Our bill for social services in England and Wales (only), with a population of some 40 million souls, during 1930, amounted to £407,545,000, or over 2,000 million dollars. In spite of this, it has been estimated that today one person out of ten is too dull or unhealthy to be absorbed into industry; one in 120 is mentally defective; one in 300 is *certified* as insane, and a large number in addition to this are uncertified.

What is wrong? I believe the answer to be that we have forgotten heredity, and we have forgotten that if heredity does not work for us it works against us. We have concentrated upon nurture and we have neglected nature. In Medicine it is of interest to note that we have tended to get back farther and farther in our outlook and in our practice. From the mere cure of the individual patient we have turned our attention to the control of the disease and the increase of the patient's resistance to disease. We call this preventive medicine, and we are all of us convinced of the wisdom of this orientation in medical science. Then again, we have attended more and more to the child and from the child we have turned our attention to the infant and we have gone back still further, even to prenatal life. But we must go back further still, for by the time the new individual is conceived heredity has already stamped upon it, either the power to live healthily or handicaps from which, lavish our care upon it as we may, it may never be able to shake itself free. Eugenics, in actual fact, if we take the long view and not the short one, is the soundest and by far the most profitable form of preventive medicine. This, as I indicated in my opening remarks, is my thesis.

To some here this evening all this may seem like beating a willing horse. They must forgive me my emphasis, because they must remember the lag that exists in the minds of many others on this matter. There is (i) first of all, the attitude of the determinists amongst us—those who say, "Why interfere with nature? She will see us through all right. And, anyway, does not evolution arrange these things over our heads?" Granted the vital forces of nature and of evolutionary tendencies, these forces can themselves, we have reasons for believing, be brought under control. But though we all agree in striving to get control of things and forces which are physical and chemical, we boggle at the idea of getting control over things and forces which are biological. Why do we? I can think of no reason save a deep-seated prejudice, which no doubt has its roots in the dim and distant past, when a new individual was thought to be a direct gift, or burden—as the case may be—from the

god of the race or of the tribe. That it is the product of two individuals, that it inherits physical, mental and even temperamental characteristics from those two individuals, and that these can to some extent be modified at will, is knowledge of comparatively recent origin.

I suggest that civilization has advanced far enough to encourage us to achieve biological control just as actively as we seek to achieve physical control. I go further, and suggest that efforts at achieving biological control are already overdue. Biological control in the human sphere, I mean, since no one seems to question either the wisdom, or the morality, of achieving biological control in the animal and in the plant worlds. We accept the principle in relation to our horses, our cattle, our dogs, our corn and our cabbages. But we gasp at the idea of accepting the principle in respect of men and women.

(ii) Then, again, there is opposition from a particular section of the Church. The principle of attempting biological control offends the religious emotions and ideas of some of us. I do not propose to enter this particular arena, although I am constrained to admit, however reluctantly, that the particular aspect of public health for which I am pleading today is becoming more and more a religious issue. The degree to which a man's religion determines his views on questions of the kind I am discussing tonight must be settled in the sanctity of his own secret heart. Nor shall I do more than remind myself of the golden rule, and that it is quite as applicable in the eugenic field as in the field of the environmentalist.

(iii) Then there are some critics who say that we have not as yet enough knowledge upon which to put eugenic principles into action. My answer to this is to admit in the first place that our present knowledge of genetics, that is, of the laws governing human heredity, is certainly meagre. But I advance in the second place that until more observation and research are undertaken in respect of these laws we shall remain ignorant. We cannot employ the same methods in the study of genetics in the human race as we can with domestic animals and with plants. And

the characteristics to be observed are vastly more complex. But we know enough to feel sure that there is a mass of unascertained facts that would prove of enormous value if we had them, and we have definite reasons for believing that the basic laws which we know to operate in plants and in animals operate also in human beings. In other words, it is highly probable that, if we chose to do so, we could go a long way towards encouraging dominant characteristics that make for physical and mental health in men and women and discouraging characteristics that spell physical and mental ill-health.

But suppose my thesis that the eugenic outlook is an important aspect of preventive medicine be accepted, and it be desired to pursue the principle into practice, what can be done?

1. In the first place the study of genetics should find a place in the universities and schools, and should be encouraged by the foundation of scholarships and research studentships.

2. Genetics should be taught to medical students. We are told, and we know by our own experience, that the medical curriculum is already too full. But room should be made, and could easily be made, in the preclinical subjects (e.g. physiology) by the omission of something which is far less important.

3. The compilation of family pedigrees should be encouraged. These have a value for the individuals who compile them over and above their value to the seeker after genetic information. The Eugenics Society of London has prepared a schedule which is very useful in this connection, and which makes the filling in of the particulars comparatively simple.

4. Health examinations before marriage should be encouraged. In my judgment such examinations should be voluntary. In certain countries—Germany is one—pre-nuptial examinations are obligatory, and people are not allowed to get married unless the results of these examinations have proved that they are fit. The great objection to compulsory pre-nuptial examinations is the ease with



which persons who resented examination could conceal or distort important facts. A simple form of pre-marital schedule has been issued by the Eugenics Society, and has already been in considerable demand. It has received the blessing of the Ministry of Health in Great Britain, and of the medical press also. A healthy sign of the times is the increasing number of persons who consult their doctors prior to marriage. Such consultations should be encouraged. A man and a woman should be proud of being found fit for parenthood.

5. But anyone should be proud of being fit and of keeping fit. The maxim "know thyself" is very ancient but few of us put it into practice. It takes a war to stimulate most governments to carry out a national stocktaking in regard to the physique and mental health of its citizens. And I am ashamed to say that some of them regard the omission of the census as a form of economy in times that are stringent. Surely the more stringent the times the more need for careful stocktaking. What should we think of a shopkeeper who adopted methods like these? It should be possible for men and women, especially those of marriageable age, to produce, if not a pedigree, then at least a statement, kept up to date, of their physical and mental fitness. Here, again, would be engendered a legitimate pride in the fact of being a healthy citizen.

6. The positive application of the eugenics principle, however, takes us farther than this. We must do our utmost, by cultivating a family conscience, to counteract the selfishness of the childless marriage when both parents are healthy, and by combating that "tender-mindedness" which is so common in these days in women who refuse to brace themselves to fulfil their main function in life.

7. And if the monetary status of the parents is a real, and not merely a selfish, bar against a family, which, if the truth be said, it quite frequently is, we must help them by a proper scheme of family allowances, whether by the remission of taxes or by even more direct assistance. In most civilized countries the birth-rate is falling. Quite soon the figures may be such as to cause alarm in the minds of

those who have the interest of their nation at heart. The guiding tenet of Galton is based upon qualitative lines, not on quantitative lines. And we dare not sacrifice quality to quantity. But there is no reason why both of these desiderata should not be attained if the principles of eugenics are strictly followed.

So far I have dealt with the practice of the eugenic principle on positive lines. But there is a negative aspect of Eugenics also, and this aspect has attracted a disproportionate amount of attention. It has attracted more attention because it is both easier, and more immediate, in its attainment, is more dramatic in its appeal and because it involves much less self-sacrifice.

8. At the present time there are two practical examples of negative Eugenics. The first of these is sterilization of the unfit. The Eugenics Society in Great Britain is a strong advocate for the legalization of voluntary sterilization, under appropriate safeguards, for persons suffering from, or carrying, transmissible defects which seriously impair physical or mental efficiency. It considers that, without introducing compulsion, valuable results can be achieved by awakening throughout the community an enlightened eugenic conscience. The legal position in regard to sterilization, in Great Britain at all events, is highly unsatisfactory: a doctor who advises, or himself performs, an operation for sterilization has no legal cover. He may be made the subject of an action at law and if the jury should take an adverse view of the matter, he may be mulcted in heavy damages. This is scarcely an encouragement to the doctor. Moreover, the present state of the law in England throws a stigma also upon the patient. There are those who consider that the safeguards proposed hitherto in regard to the proposed Bill are unnecessarily severe and restrictive; there are others who desire to see compulsory sterilization introduced. But the official view of the Eugenics Society is that the greater hope of inculcating a eugenic conscience lies along the path of voluntary, rather than enforced, sterilization.

A great deal of propaganda is still necessary to popularize this measure. Many people do not know that the risk

to life of a sterilizing operation is very small indeed in the female and negligible in the male; that in the latter it can be performed under a local anaesthetic and that in neither sex does it in the least degree impair health or change the sex function, except in the matter of conception.

9. The second form of practical negative eugenics is what is termed Birth-Control; though the more correct term should be conception or pregnancy control, the words Birth-Control have become too popular to be ousted in favor of the more accurate expression.

Time does not allow me to deal fully with the history of this measure of negative eugenics. It is, of course, as old as Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. It has had a chequered career. It has been blessed and it has been cursed. That it has come to stay seems certain, but that there is no method yet known which is free from some disadvantage is equally certain. The disadvantage may be physiological or it may be aesthetic or it may be no more nor less than that the method is unreliable; the fact remains that so far we have not found a method that is anything like perfect. Research is necessary, therefore, and such research is being actively undertaken in several countries. In Great Britain grants are made from the funds of the Eugenics Society to the Investigation Committee of the National Birth Control Association for this purpose.

The British Ministry of Health encourages the teaching of birth-control by the municipal authorities through their medical officers of health to married women at special clinics. Originally restricted to women for whom confinement would involve risk of life and to women suffering from serious organic disease, the Ministry memorandum last issued leaves a good deal of discretion to the doctor and may no doubt be read to include women whose state of general health and nutrition would be badly impaired, whether from physical, mental or economic reasons, by further child bearing.

Unfortunately the practice of Birth-Control has tended to act dysgenically rather than eugenically during the past 50 years. This is because its use has been largely confined to persons of superior biological endowment, rather than

by those who have needed most some means whereby the births of their children might be spaced. This spacing of births, it is generally agreed, is the only proper use to which the practice of contraception should be put. The only way to correct this fault of instruction in contraceptive methods not reaching the class for which they are most helpful is to provide it through local authorities under medical supervision in properly organized clinics. But such instruction should not be confined to women whose lives are in danger from subsequent confinements nor to those who are suffering from gynecological diseases. It should, however, invariably be under medical control and supervision.

Need I, in this place, and in the year of our Lord 1936, deal with those critics who advance as an objection to Birth-Control that its practice tends to the increase of sex promiscuity? Are we never to grow up? Does anyone still seriously hold that men and women can be made moral agents through fear of contracting disease or of producing illegitimate offspring? And, anyway, shall we penalize women who have dire need of help in the legitimate spacing of their childbirths because other folk exist who would find it easier to break through the conventions that society and the sanctity of family life impose upon them, as the result of this knowledge that they steal for their own ends? Surely there can only be one answer to this question.

I have now completed my analysis of the eugenic outlook, and I repeat that I hope it may be regarded as having an intimate bearing upon preventive medicine when the long view is taken. And experience, with some thought, has led me to the belief that the long view, in human affairs, is the soundest view. I know that this is the day of direct action, and that, to many, the long view is unpopular. But I am distrustful of quick ways of achieving the millenium and I regard the lust for direct action as being merely a temporary break in the growth of human wisdom. The gist of the matter seems to me to be summed up in the question: are we going to continue to breed, and to support, a race of sub-men, or are we going to encourage the elevation of the race, and thus reduce our commitments in the field of what

we term the social services? I repeat that I believe what the public, or the common, health needs more than anything at this time is that it should be regarded from the viewpoint of Eugenics. I will end my remarks by summarizing the aim of Eugenics as I see it. If I have brought coals to Newcastle I must crave your pardon. If I have not, I am glad of the opportunity of offering some fuel for your mental consumption.

"The aim of Eugenics is to study the laws of heredity as they apply to human beings, with the practical purpose of using this knowledge for improving the physical and mental quality of the race. Eugenists believe that no child should be born into the world who is unlikely to have a fair chance. They affirm, therefore, that anyone, man or woman, who undertakes the serious responsibility of parenthood, must be free from any disease, mental defect, or other disability that is likely to be passed on by heredity and so impair the quality of future generations. Most intelligent people now share this view; indeed, many have too few children, because they wish to give the best care and attention to each child. But the nation is endangered when fit people refuse to have children for selfish reasons. Every country needs the best citizens it can produce.

But if it is agreed that people who are sound in body and mind should have as many children as they can afford to bring up, it follows that people who are ill-endowed in body or mind, and whose offspring are liable to be unhealthy or subnormal, should avoid having children. The next generation should be recruited from good stocks rather than from bad. But exactly the opposite is now happening, for it is among the fittest stocks that the birth-rate is lowest and among the unfit that it is highest. We should not be content to allow this to continue. We should encourage the fertility of persons likely to produce healthy children, and at the same time prevent the waste and misery caused by the birth of children who are healthy neither in mind nor in body. These policies deserve the serious consideration of every citizen and especially of young people who are entering on adult life and beginning to realize its responsibilities."